Community Archives and the Limitations of Identity: Considering Discursive Impact on Material Needs

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Abstract

This article examines how a postmodern-influenced discourse of identity shapes and influences critical analysis of community archives, both internally and externally, and asks if the accompanying terms of engagement shift focus, to negative effect, from the more pressing needs and challenges of these institutions and projects. Looking to archival professional literature and to a recent self-assessment of the Japanese American National Museum, the article argues that an overarching emphasis on questions of identity can distract community institutions from pragmatic evaluations of sustainable practice and can inadvertently mire archivists in a marginalizing rhetoric that blurs the issues at hand.

In 2010, the Los Angeles–based Japanese American National Museum (JANM) celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary, an appropriate moment to recognize the institution's remarkable evolution from a small community organization mobilized "to safeguard the rich oral histories of first generation immigrants, or Issei, and the artifacts, photographs, written records and other materials documenting the lives of Japanese Americans" to the impressive campus of today.[1] With its 85,000-square-foot pavilion housing a central hall, multiple exhibition galleries, a gift shop, a resource center, and custom on-site storage, JANM currently stewards the largest collection of Japanese American

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1   Japanese American National Museum, "History of the Japanese American National Museum," http://www.janm.org/about/history/, accessed 27 July 2011.

historical artifacts and documents in the world. The institution has been accredited by the American Association of Museums, is an official affiliate of the Smithsonian, and, in 2010, was the recipient of the Institute of Museum and Library Services National Medal in recognition of "extraordinary civic, educational, economic, environmental, and social contributions," all supporting evidence for JANM's self-proclaimed status as a "world-class museum."[2] At the same time, for years, JANM's funding model has remained largely tied to the community that helped establish it, while its daily operations continue to draw upon the assistance of a large pool of local volunteers, many of them long term and most of Japanese American heritage. This combination of professional accolades, grand space, unparalleled historical collections, and community involvement positions JANM at the apex of cultural community heritage institutions, internationally recognized but still at the service of its original pool of constituents, a potential aspirational model, and a validating symbol of ethnic history. Despite these accomplishments, at its twenty-fifth-year milestone, JANM also finds itself at a critical point. It has had to drastically retrench, an action precipitated by a budget cut of over a million dollars in 2008 that halved its staffing and sharply reduced its open hours and services.[3] Access to JANM's permanent collection, including approximately sixty thousand artifacts and over six hundred linear feet of archival materials, remains limited due to lack of staff to accommodate interested researchers, and it is uncertain when and if this situation will be remedied. After a brief moratorium, however, JANM is again accepting offers of donations to its holdings.[4]

Recognizing the need to take action, the leadership of JANM embarked on a self-assessment with the goal of positioning itself for a viable future.[5] But framing JANM's self-assessment is an insistent stress upon the centrality of community identity to institutional identity that unintentionally precludes direct analysis of JANM's collections management needs. This focus on identity echoes strongly the similar attention in the archival literature to community archives as a discursive site for engaging with postmodern-influenced questions of identity, subjectivity, and diversity. By examining how the predominance of the discourse

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[2] Japanese American National Museum, "About the Museum," http://www.janm.org/about/, accessed 27 July 2011, and Japanese American National Museum, *The Cultural Museum 2.0: Engaging Diverse Audiences in America* (August 2009), http://media.janm.org/projects/innovation/janm-cultural-museum.pdf, 24, accessed 2 December 2011.

[3] See artdaily.org, "Japanese American National Museum to Celebrate 25th Anniversary in 2010," http://www.artdaily.com/index.asp?int_new=35377&int_sec=2, accessed 20 July 2011.

[4] See Japanese American National Museum, "National Museum to Change Public Hours for Store, HNRC, Visits to Galleries" (press release, 18 January 2009), http://www.janm.org/press/release/169/; Japanese American National Museum, "Hirasaki National Resource Center," http://www.janm .org/nrc/, accessed 15 November 2011; and Japanese American National Museum, "Donating Your Artifacts to the National Museum," http://www.janm.org/collections/artifact-donation/, accessed 20 July 2011.

[5] artdaily.org, "Japanese American National Museum to Celebrate 25th Anniversary in 2010."

of identity shapes and influences critical analysis and evaluation of community archives, both internally and externally, this article suggests that just as JANM's focus on identity ultimately interferes with effective self-evaluation and planning, the discourse of identity hinders the broader discussion of community archives in archival professional literature because of its inability to describe, address, and engage effectively with the realities and needs of the actual organizations themselves. As JANM's situation illustrates, a more integrated understanding of sustainable community archives is urgently needed. However, by limiting its scope of assessment to its identity, JANM risks the very historical record it set out to preserve. And, by continuing to privilege theoretical rhetoric over a practical understanding of community archives' material needs, the archival profession hazards the perpetuation of the segregation and marginalization it seeks so adamantly to remedy.

While the 2008 economic meltdown may have served as an accelerant, JANM's fiscal crisis was most likely inevitable. JANM arrived at this realization as early as 2006 when it began a three-year analysis, detailed in the 2009 white paper *The Cultural Museum 2.0: Engaging Diverse Audiences in America*, to address the premise that "we are faced with a future where Americans no longer fit neatly into easily hyphenated categories" and "organizations . . . must balance the needs of their core constituency—the ethnic or cultural communities out of which they grew and who they are accustomed to serving—with the needs of an expanding audience that no longer identifies itself based solely on cultural or racial categories."[6] Specifically, JANM grappled with the fact that "the demographics of the Japanese American community [have] transformed over the last several decades due to geographic dispersion, postwar immigration, and the aging of the Nisei generation, the primary stakeholders and founders of community organizations."[7] Further complicating the situation, Japanese Americans now have one of the highest rates of "out marriage" of any Asian American ethnic group. Younger generations of Japanese Americans were increasingly identifying themselves as "multiracial" and "Asian American," and the historical narrative of a Japanese American community rooted to the immigration wave of the early twentieth century and galvanized by the internment experience might no longer resonate strongly with them. To better understand the needs and interests of this new demographic, *The Cultural Museum 2.0* study launched extensive data-gathering activities, including surveys, focus groups, and interviews. Questions and discussion topics addressed individual ethnic identification and its influence on activities and interests, attitudes toward cultural institutions in general, and the perception of JANM specifically. In its qualitative

[6] Japanese American National Museum, *The Cultural Museum 2.0*, 1.

[7] Japanese American National Museum, *The Cultural Museum 2.0*, 10.

findings, JANM highlighted the desire among younger potential audiences "to see themselves in some way in the exhibitions." This might be through shows perceived as relevant to their interests and experiences, for example, or through opportunities to interact with installations and presentations.[8] In response, JANM piloted a new slate of programming meant to engage a younger, multiracial-identified audience both in form, such as a "salon" series that prompted audience participation, and in subject, including a pop art show curated by Eric Nakamura, the popular editor of the Asian American magazine, *Giant Robot.* With the success of this new programming—the 2008 *Giant Robot Biennale* exhibition was the best attended public opening in the institution's history—*The Cultural Museum 2.0* concludes that "the Museum better understands how to engage younger and more diverse audiences," while also acknowledging a need to leverage that interest into long-term personal identification with the institution and its mission: "Efforts must be made to invite them to come in—into the Museum, into a Web site, or into a social network—and stay a while, letting them get to know each other in addition to the Museum and creating new communities in the process."[9]

The Cultural Museum 2.0 states that this new outreach focus "did not alter the Museum's original mission—rather, it reinterpreted it for a twenty-first-century audience," and that "The Museum will continue to research, preserve, and present the experiences of Japanese Americans."[10] Nonetheless, JANM's permanent collection, including both artifacts and archives, receives no further mention within the fifty-five-page document. Nor does the report refer to JANM's Hirasaki National Resource Center, the library and archival reading room of the institution, leaving it unclear if the collection and the gateway to its access play any role in the institution's long-term vision.

The primacy of identity and community to JANM's self-image evidenced in the assessment focus of *The Cultural Museum 2.0* is clearly tied to its generative narrative that locates the institution's inspiration in the social and political activism of the 1960s and 1970s, particularly the community-oriented aspects of the Asian American Movement.[11] The changes of this period inspired a new racial and ethnic awareness among Japanese Americans that encouraged "Asian Americans [to become] active participants in the making of history, reversing

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[8] Japanese American National Museum, *The Cultural Museum 2.0*, 42.

[9] Japanese American National Museum, *The Cultural Museum 2.0*, 36

[10] Japanese American National Museum, *The Cultural Museum 2.0*, 14, 32.

[11] Akemi Kikumura-Yano, Lane Ryo Hirabayashi, and James A. Hirabayashi, eds., *Common Ground: The Japanese American National Museum and the Culture of Collaboration* (Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 2005), 207.

standard accounts that had treated Asian Americans as marginal objects."[12] This promotion of a "history by the people" was beneficially symbiotic with a valuing of a "history of the people." As Karen Ishizuka, filmmaker and longtime JANM consultant, notes, "As historically disenfranchised groups insist on their own self-determination, primary documents such as family photographs, diaries, letters—and home movies—provide first-person points of view that fuel the power and the means to recover that which would otherwise be absent and invisible."[13] The legacy of these values is most clearly manifested today in JANM's permanent collection, with a predominance of primary materials as described by Ishizuka—including family papers and photographs, household items, local publications, and the records of small businesses and neighborhood temples and churches—reflecting everyday community life and first-person perspectives on historical events. JANM's holistic approach to collection development made little distinction between material types in initial appraisal, instead emphasizing provenance and the contextual and interconnected nature of historical meaning-making. An accession might then include farm equipment, folders of correspondence, and a selection of rare books, all identified together as a family collection rather than as a number of individual artifacts and monographs and a series of papers. In this context, the "museum" in JANM's name is more an invocation of its general role in the preservation and presentation of community history than a formal statement of its institutional or collecting function.[14]

The growing interest in capturing and preserving a "history of the people" within the Japanese American community coincided with a rising concern among archivists and public historians for the need to increase and improve representation of historically "underdocumented" groups in repositories.[15] By the time of JANM's incorporation in 1986, a number of earlier projects had already begun to collect Japanese American oral histories and related documents.[16] JANM, however, distinguished itself from these projects in two pivotal and interconnected ways. First, though JANM's staff and advisors included

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[12] Glenn Omatsu, "The 'Four Prisons' and the Movements of Liberation: Asian American Activism from the 1960s to the 1990s," in *Asian American Politics: Law, Participation, and Policy*, ed. Don T. Nakanashi and James S. Lai (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 142.

[13] Kikumura et al., *Common Ground*, 13–14.

[14] JANM's collections managers, librarians, and archivists deploy professional standards and practices appropriate to specific material types but have, for the most part, worked together within one unified department.

[15] The roots of this development are commonly traced to historian Howard Zinn's address to the 1971 Society of American Archivists (SAA) Annual Meeting and to Gerald Ham's 1975 SAA Presidential Address. See Dominique Daniel, "Documenting the Immigrant and Ethnic Experience in American Archives," *The American Archivist* 73 (Spring/Summer 2010): 82–83.

[16] For example, see the Japanese American Oral History Project Collection at the Center for Oral and Public History, California State University Fullerton, and the Japanese American Research Project at UCLA, Special Collections, Young Research Library.

established academics, unlike other projects, it was not officially associated with a university, a point that JANM still emphasizes today through its repeated self-identification as a "community-based" organization.[17] Second, in addition to gathering and preserving historical materials, JANM "was conceptualized as a place where Japanese Americans would be able to present their own history in their own words and ways."[18] Community members would not only engage in self-documentation; they would also be the curators and interpreters of their history. The institution's location in a traditionally Japanese American neighborhood of Los Angeles further emphasized its accessibility and accountability to the community while the use of local Japanese American volunteers as gallery docents and tour leaders spoke to an active community role as "host" to interested visitors, rather than as passive subject.

JANM's commitment to "an intensely personal experience of historical events"[19] and community self-representation foreshadowed, in a sense, the evolution in the archival professional discourse on diversity. From Howard Zinn and F. Gerald Ham's early calls to archivists for more inclusive documentation strategies, emphasis in the profession has more recently shifted to advocacy for the active and ongoing role of communities in appraisal and stewardship, recognition and validation of a broader spectrum of documentation formats, and a better understanding of the symbolic relationship of records and artifacts to identity and collective memory, developments in the conceptualization of archival theory and practice that broaden the traditional scope of the field. Though diverse in application, these newer perspectives are unified through their position as perceived challenges to prior assumptions informing historical documentation strategies and archival practice. This shared theoretical position, in turn, encourages an association of the actual projects, collections, and institutions that facilitate related discussions through their location on the margins of a more dominant cultural narrative. Applying the popular rubric of "community archives" to this grouping, Andrew Flinn and Mary Stevens, invoking cultural theorist Stuart Hall, emphasize their resistance to "the distortions and omissions of orthodox historical narratives," casting them together as essentially political, both resistive of and intervening in the act of laying claim to the traditional tools and functions of historical production, stewardship, interpretation,

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[17] Kikumura et al., *Common Ground*, viii, 1.

[18] Kikumura et al., *Common Ground*, 14.

[19] Kikumura et al., *Common Ground*, 3.

and access.[20] In this understanding, JANM's ideological quest to make visible "a largely untold and unrecognized part of America's social diversity" represents its nature as a community archives as much as its basic mission to document and preserve the history of a specific community.[21]

This conflation of community archives as both physical and analytical site has gained significant traction in archival literature and is often described through the discourse of postmodernism, a theoretical apparatus that many feel provides effective means for challenging traditional assumptions in archival practice about objectivity, authenticity, and historical relevance.[22] As Dominique Daniel summarizes in "Documenting the Immigrant and Ethnic Experience in American Archives,"

> Speaking from a wide range of perspectives and expressing varied views postmodernists explored at least two aspects that bear on archival theory: an assault on objectivity and impartiality, and a call to dismantle the dominant discourse and recover the voices of marginalized and oppressed groups.[23]

Articulated, however, as a recognition of the inevitability of subjectivity and a validation of a multiplicity of narratives or perspectives, applications of post-modernist theories of identity, particularly when applied to community archives, can become dominated by a celebratory embrace of diversity that focuses more on acknowledging possibilities than on the power dynamics of marginalization. The definition of *community archives* must be drafted in necessarily broad strokes to fully encompass all possible identity constructions, including, as Flinn and

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[20] Andrew Flinn and Mary Stevens, "'It is noh mistri, wi mekin histri.' Telling Our Own Story: Independent and Community Archives in the U.K., Challenging and Subverting the Mainstream," in *Community Archives: The Shaping of Memory*, ed. Jeannette Allis Bastian and Ben Alexander (London: Facet, 2010), 4–5. The category of community archives in Great Britain has its roots in a juxtaposition to mainstream cultural heritage institutions supported by centralized public funding sources. For more on this relationship between community archives and public funding, see David Mander, "Special, Local and about Us: The Development of Community Archives in Britain," in Bastian and Alexander, *Community Archives*; and Victor Gray's presidentital address to the Society of Archivists Conference, 29 August 2007, Belfast, "'Who's that Knocking on Our Door?': Archives, Outreach, and Community," *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 29 (April 2008): 1–8. More decentralized and diverse sources of funding in the United States make a clear comparison difficult. The political reality of discrimination and marginalization and its legacy of exclusion from mainstream historical resources, however, gives weight to Flinn and Steven's thematic take on the category and its applicability across borders.

[21] Kikumura et al., *Common Ground*, 207.

[22] For examples, see Carolyn Heald, "Is There Room for Archives in the Postmodern World?," *The American Archivist* 59 (Winter 1996); Tom Nesmith, "Seeing Archives: Postmodernism and the Changing Intellectual Place of Archives," *The American Archivist* 65 (Spring/Summer 2002); Terry Cook, "Archival Science and Postmodernism: New Formulations for Old Concepts," *Archival Science: International Journal of Recorded Information* 1 (2001); and "Fashionable Nonsense of Professional Rebirth: Postmodernism and the Practice of Archives," *Archivaria* 51 (2001); and Mark Greene, "The Power of Meaning: The Archival Mission in the Postmodern Age," *The American Archivist* 65 (Spring/Summer 2002).

[23] Daniel, "Documenting the Immigrant and Ethnic Experience," 90.

Stevens list, "self-definition and self-identification by locality, ethnicity, faith, sexuality, occupation, ideology, shared interest or any combination of the above."[24] With the absence of more easily demarcated identifiers such as institutional function or collection format to offset its expansiveness, a clear general definition of *community archives* is difficult to delineate, creating a predicament addressed head on by Jeannette A. Bastian and Ben Alexander, the editors of *Community Archives: The Shaping of Memory*. Tasked with writing an introduction for a collection of essays covering varied geographical, societal, and professional expanses, they ask, "How do you construct a collected volume around ideas that are generally 'understood' but not well articulated, that essentially are agreed upon to be fundamentally subjective?" only to decide, somewhat tautologically, that subjectivity may be enough: "While the 'subjectivity' of community initially lay at the heart of the editors' concerns it also proved to be the glue, binding all definitions together and resulting in rewarding analyses as well as inspired and unexpected insights."[25] Nonetheless, Bastian and Alexander continue to identify cohesion among the essays in common themes of "an expanding and expandable view of a record," "the dynamic structures of communities and their complex cultural expressions [that] challenge archivists to look beyond traditional practice and embrace new ways of seeing and understanding records," and "the relationship between records and memory," particularly as related to issues of social justice and community memory and expression. In his review of *Community Archives*, Randall Jimerson arrives at a similar conclusion. After listing the many and varying categories of community covered by the volume—"You want diversity? Here it is," he summarizes—Jimerson finds unifying threads in "how archives connect people to concepts such as group identity, power, accountability, social justice, and rescuing the forgotten voices of previously marginalized peoples," concerns that maintain the association of community archives with an interventionist and resistive position born out of situations of marginalization, oppression, and suppression.[26]

In 2000, Elisabeth Kaplan contended in her seminal article on the founding of the American Jewish Historical Society, "We Are What We Collect, We Collect What We Are: Archives and the Construction of Identity," that, in contemporary archival analytical literature, undertheorized concepts of identity perpetuate essentialized categorizations of communities, facilitating misguided assumptions of authenticity that elide genuine internal diversity and re-inscribe

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[24] Flinn and Stevens, "'It is noh mistri, wi mekin histri.'," 5.

[25] Jeannette Allis Bastian and Ben Alexander, "Introduction: Communities and Archives—A Symbiotic Relationship," in Bastian and Alexander, *Community Archives*, xxi–xxii.

[26] Randall C. Jimerson, review of *Community Archives: The Shaping of Memory*, ed. Bastian and Alexander, *The American Archivist* 73 (Fall/Winter 2010): 687.

segregating boundaries.[27] Ironically, archival discourse drawing on a perspective of identity and its constant companion modifier, subjectivity, grounded in post-modern theory may fare no better. While illimitable definitions of terms such as *subjectivity* and *identity* help avoid the exclusion Kaplan cautions against, the lack of boundaries can ultimately call their real utility for analysis into question. In their article, "Beyond 'Identity'," Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper argue that this stretching of *identity* has impoverished the term of all usefulness: "[c]onceptualizing all affinities and affiliations, all forms of belonging, all experiences of commonality, connectedness, and cohesion, all self-understand-ings and self-identifications in the idiom of 'identity' saddles us with a blunt, flat, undifferentiated vocabulary" that is "so infinitely elastic as to be incapable of performing serious analytical work" or of providing necessary leverage for prag-matic change.[28]

In this light, the application of the loose discourse of subjectivity and iden-tity to discussions of projects outside or against a perceived mainstream is par-ticularly troubling. It emphasizes a theoretical position that is constructed and relative but consistently and firmly located within the actual marginalized com-munities with the most at stake in resistive or interventionist action. As a result, while the problems of unreliable documentation of politically and economically disenfranchised communities remain a topic in vital need of attention, active engagement and positive change may be hindered by critical analysis that relies on a vocabulary of baggy applications and reductive connections that continue to override relevant diversity in the resulting discussions. Reference in archival literature to the communities of community archives may or may not include points relevant to issues of religion, class, sexual orientation, or race. Ethnicity and race may be used interchangeably or race may drop quietly from the con-versation altogether.[29] Even in reference to more bounded groupings, such as recent immigrant communities, generalized commonalities may be highlighted over the specificities of difference, including those as influential as national context, relationships between spoken language and language of record, and impetus for emigration. Conversely, selected specificities may be raised as rep-resentative of issues for the whole, supporting misperceptions that the chal-lenges for one community archives are the challenges for all community

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[27] Elisabeth Kaplan, "We Are What We Collect, We Collect What We Are: Archives and the Construction of Identity," *The American Archivist* 63 (2000): 126–51.

[28] Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, "Beyond 'Identity'," *Theory and Society* 29 (2000): 2, 11.

[29] Joel Wurl articulates what may be the general discomfort behind taking the argument of constructed identity to the point of interrogating race, commenting, "While I do subscribe to the position that race, too, is a social construction and not a biological imperative, I can't overlook the reality that racial thinking in this country most often ascribes this particular identity for us." "Ethnicity as Provenance: In Search of Values and Principles for Documenting the Immigrant Experience," *Archival Issues* 29 (2005): 70.

archives.[30] The specifics and details of historical disenfranchisement may be absent, represented instead in scholarly interchange by invocations of "power" and "disempowerment," assessments that are compelling but easily problematized. This blurriness in terminology of critical inquiry can produce positions or assertions that are functionally unworkable or ineffectual when mapped back onto actual policy, offering little assistance in remedying the situations they seek to address.[31] Ultimately, in critical engagement with community archives, the concept of *identity* seems unable to provide a workable middle ground for analysis, tipping between facilitating flattened and exoticized misconceptions of authenticity and a subjectivity so diffuse no purchase for action can be found.

Further confusion arises with the conflation of communities, the institutions or projects that document their histories, and the resulting collections themselves. In "We Are What We Collect, We Collect What We Are," Kaplan cautions against accepting collections as authentic and full representations of their associated communities, citing the social and political influences at play for the American Jewish Historical Society at the turn of the last century as it built its collection and established its institution. For Kaplan, "papering over" differences in the American Jewish community ultimately could do nothing to effectively combat the prevalent anti-Semitism of the period. She asserts that "[there] was no conceivable way for the founders to counter successfully something so entrenched, bitter, and irrational, using positive, rational means."[32] JANM, founded many decades later during the transformative era of the 1960s and 1970s, complicates a direct application of this perspective. With a national sensibility arguably more open to its efforts, JANM's strategic agendas, aimed at a variety of audiences and stakeholders, demonstrate that while public identities

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[30] This seems most common in the example of "nontraditional" formats of recordkeeping and historical knowledge conveyance. An immigrant community with an active or recent connection to oral traditions or other unfixed expressions of group communication has specific concerns that may not be an issue to third- or fourth-generation immigrant communities from a predominantly written records culture.

[31] In a 6 January 2011 letter to the ALA Task Force on Traditional Cultural Expressions, SAA president Helen R. Tibbo commenting on a draft of "Presidential Traditional Cultural Expressions (TCE) Task Force Report," points to a lack of clarity in the distinction between "traditional cultural expressions" and the "cultural materials" referred to in the same document, also noting:

> More generally, the report could benefit from a stronger definition of what constitutes a traditional group. The report suggests that it is primarily concerned with Native Americans, but there is nothing in the WIPO [World Intellectual Property Organization] definitions that would limit it to such groups. The inclusion of "ethnic groups" is an example of the confusion about what is meant by the term (and by WIPO's deliberations). Are the Blues, for example, a traditional cultural expression of African Americans? If so, should African Americans be able to control access to and use of the Blues? The answers to these questions are not apparent in the definitions in the policy document.

As another example, Joel Wurl's "Ethnicity as Provenance" is at its most confusing as it seeks to define the fluid target of its title and at its most compelling in its discussion of possible alternative modes of custody and stewardship.

[32] Kaplan, "We Are What We Collect,"150.

may indeed be constructed, those acts of construction can have a strategic and tactical multivalence that precludes simple binaries of inclusion and exclusion.[33] Further, Emiko Hastings's examination of the relationship between Japanese Americans and government documentation demonstrates that intentions and influences of creators or collectors aside, documents can be unruly, conveying unanticipated information to unforeseen audiences, and researchers bring their own agendas and contexts that can surmount or circumvent intended meanings.[34] Nonetheless, the true nature of the relationship between communities, community institutions, and community collections remains unclear in both theory and practice. The term *community* is already stretched in application with the expectation that it can reconcile the interplay of multiple identifications, shifting allegiances, and external and internal inscription of boundaries—part of the complex conundrum that prompted the strategy of all-inclusive definitions in the first place—with the physical evidence of real functioning and identifiable "collectives."[35] Even if a working definition of *community* can be agreed upon, Flinn and Stevens note that little data-driven evidence has actually been gathered to support the assumption that "community archives and related heritage projects deliver a strong sense of belonging or of identity and that such feelings or identities are socially productive."[36]

The quantitative data and qualitative feedback gathered by JANM and presented in *The Cultural Museum 2.0* might be interpreted to support some kind of association or affinity of community members with community institutions. Whether that investment extends to the collection, however, is uncertain. Results of a survey on the most important function of JANM rate "Researching and sharing the Japanese American experience" the highest of four choices, with "Collecting and housing historical records and artifacts" a distant tie for

[33] JANM's negotiation of multiple audiences and agendas through its exhibitions and programming is discussed in detail in both LeiLani Nishime, "Communities on Display: Museums and the Creation of the (Asian) American Citizen," *Amerasia Journal* 30 (December 2004): 41–60; and Stephanie Takaragawa, "Visualizing Japanese-America: The Japanese American National Museum and the Construction of Identity," *Visual Anthropology Review* 18 (March 2002): 37–47.

[34] Emiko Hastings, "'No Longer a Silent Victim of History': Repurposing the Documents of Japanese American Internment," *Archival Science* 11 (2011): 25–46.

[35] In "Ethnicity as Provenance," Joel Wurl writes, "Yet what sometimes gets missed in this assessment of ethnicity as a product of social formulation is the basic reality that ethnic community life does, nonetheless, exist and persist. . . . Human beings do, indeed, come together around common languages, geographic origins, modes of cultural expression, religion, cuisine and more, and develop ways of behaving as an integrated social system—again, a collective." The myriad influences on Japanese American community identity are discussed at length in Lon Kurashige, *Japanese American Celebration and Conflict: A History of Ethnic Identity and Festival, 1934–1990* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); and Lane Ryo Hirabayashi, "Imagined Futures: Opening Possibilities for the Construction of Culture and Community," Appendix 3, Japanese American National Museum, *The Cultural Museum 2.0.*

[36] Flinn and Stevens, "'It is noh mistri, wi mekin histri.'," 19.

third.[37] This seeming disconnect is less likely a reflection of a lack of understanding of the collection as a resource for research than a response to the impact of JANM's interpretative work, such as its exhibitions and programming, in which the research and sharing conducted by JANM does not necessarily rely on its own holdings. This is well illustrated by the successful *Giant Robot Biennale* that primarily featured items on loan.[38] In this light, the survey results imply that the relevance of JANM's permanent collection to the institution's targeted audiences, envisioned as visitors rather than researchers, may be mostly tangential.

This information seems to support *The Culture Museum 2.0*'s persistent and overarching concern with community identification and its deferral of questions on the future of its collections. If identification is the primary key to JANM's future and its desired audiences express little direct interest in the collection as an aggregate resource accessible for research, why should the support for the collection be a planning or budget priority? Such an interpretation privileges a mirroring relationship between community and institution, with one a near direct reflection of the other, reinforcing JANM's grassroots self-image as an institution defined by the community. But this perspective obscures JANM's function as a collecting institution that provides a service to the community specifically through its adherence to and support of professional practice. A purposeful outcome of early strategic planning, the aspiration to professionalization is as much part of JANM's generative narrative as its activist beginnings and its community engagement. In her account of the early days of JANM, long-time president Irene Hirano highlights this move to professionalization as an influential developmental stage, with "[t]he Board of Trustees [recognition] that to move from a volunteer organization to a credible institution, a full-time staff with professional expertise was essential."[39] This successful bid for professional legitimacy raised the institution's profile to a national level, validating its focus and allowing it to compete for federal funding and professional

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[37] See Appendix 1, "Summary of Audience Research Methodology" and Appendix 2, "Summary of Audience Research," in Japanese American National Museum, *The Cultural Museum 2.0.*

[38] Exhibitions that do draw upon JANM's permanent collection can still only feature a very small percentage of the total holdings at a time, and selection tends toward single items that lend themselves to specific interpretation.

[39] Kikumura et al., *Common Ground,* 4. While JANM emphasizes its ties to the Asian American movement and the rise of ethnic studies in the late twentieth century, its aspiration to professionalization is in part a legacy of the tradition of ethnic historical societies in the United States. Kaplan refers to the symbolic function of the ethnic historical society already in place by the 1890s, noting that "[t]he act of founding a historical society had become a demonstration of "Americanness," and the concept of an historical society itself was one that had the stamp of American approval" (p. 135). In "The Ethnic Historical Society in Changing Times," *Journal of Ethnic History* 13 (Winter 1994): 30–44, John Higham notes the role that increased involvement by scholars played in the legitimatization of ethnic historical societies; for Higham, "creeping professionalization" refers to those increased academic connections and influences that historically moved institutional focus from a popular celebratory perspective to a more scholarly one (p. 35).

accreditation. It also established a local hierarchy in which JANM could promote itself as a responsible and reliable steward for community collections, more stable than individual families or other local organizations. Offering a permanent structure with dedicated storage, controlled points of public access, and trained collections managers, curators, librarians, and archivists, JANM crafted itself as both a symbol and a provider of longevity and security for community history. This amalgamation of community and professionalism was represented by a number of experienced and specialized staff of Asian American descent and highly visible administrators and consultants with established roots in both academia and Japanese American social activism. By treating a "history of the people" with a seriousness of purpose and practice commonly associated with more mainstream historical institutions, JANM's professionalism still, in many ways, reflected its grassroots values, moving forward with confidence in the relevance of the community's history and with the assumption that the tools of professionalism were not and should not be withheld from its community members.

Professionalization in museum, library, and archives management, however, comes with an accompanying cost. In *Managing Change in the Nonprofit Sector,* a historical analysis of five privately funded research libraries, Jed Bergman speaks to the function of collections as "public goods": "[Research libraries] preserve their collections for the benefit of present and future generations, and they make these collections accessible to scholars who in turn seek to disseminate widely results of the research carried out within these libraries." Such "public goods" rarely generate direct income of consequence, but, as Bergman notes, "the labor-intensive nature" of their care and maintenance requires significant resources. In this way, "public goods" or cultural assets are also financial liabilities and, in most cases, "some constituency must be found to subsidize their [associated] activities" as they cannot be self-supporting.[40] Sources of funding that cover related professional work, however, are often contingent upon a commitment to maintaining expensive standards.[41] This obligation may in turn create an untenable situation for smaller institutions with broad missions by pressing for the adoption of multiple professional standards that are often, as Sally Foreman Griffith notes in her analysis of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, "based on practices of large single-profession institutions" with concentrated resources.[42] It is not surprising, then, that the case studies

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[40] Jed I. Bergman, *Managing Change in the Nonprofit Sector: Lessons from the Evolution of Five Independent Research Libraries* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996), 141.

[41] Sally Foreman Griffith, *Serving History in a Changing World: The Historical Society of Pennsylvania in the Twentieth Century* (Philadelphia: Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Distributed by the University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 503.

[42] Griffith, *Serving History in a Changing World*, 505.

analyzed by Bergman and Griffith conclude that, for cultural institutions reliant on private funding, very often the solution to remaining viable is through a clear definition of mission. Institutions that identify and maintain a core function are better able to seek funding strategically and allocate resources effectively. Bergman, cautioning that "there is a risk that in an effort to do good on many fronts, new obligations will be assumed that may stretch core resources too far," contrasts the American Antiquarian Society with the New-York Historical Society, noting that the decision of the former "to abandon incipient efforts to be a museum as well as a research library seems very wise in retrospect because it served to focus available energies and resources. In contrast many of the extremely serious problems faced today by the New-York Historical Society . . . can be traced to an overly all-embracing sense of what the society should be and should do."[43] At the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Griffith found that this kind of diversification—"the pursuit of all of these different professional agendas within multifaceted institutions"—resulted in tension as units competed for necessary but limited resources and support. Consequently, in 2009, to establish more financial stability and focus, the institution identified its unique strength in its research library and transferred its museum collection to the Atwater Kent Museum of Philadelphia.[44]

Dividing and transferring stewardship of JANM's holdings by format or type would be most likely detrimental to the holistic nature of the collection. Nonetheless, the obvious challenges in maintaining a large collection of artifacts in a variety of formats, an archives, a resource center, a full slate of public programming, museum education and media production departments, and a rotating exhibit schedule seem to indicate that JANM may be struggling to support an institutional model that is likely unsustainable. *The Cultural Museum 2.0*, however, makes clear that JANM perceives its fiscal crisis as coterminous with a community identity crisis rather than with its far-reaching menu of programming and services. The fading of the Nisei, JANM's historical core of financial support, has prompted JANM's endeavors to engage a new community to replace that member base with the presumption that fostering personal identification with the institution will lead to associated funding, either through direct financial support or by providing opportunities for third-party sponsors seeking to reach JANM's targeted audience. The quest to establish a new community-defined identity, however, leaves JANM no less vulnerable to the effects of the

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[43] Bergman, *Managing Change in the Nonprofit Sector*, 203.

[44] Historical Society of Pennsylvania, "About Us," http://www.hsp.org/node/2270, accessed 27 July 2011.

inevitable changes that community will also undergo in the future.[45] Further, without clearly defined core functions, JANM remains vulnerable to the reactive planning Bergman warns against. For example, JANM's self-identifications in *The Cultural Museum 2.0* includes "culturally-specific arts institution," a reference unique to the document and presumably the result of a strategy to fit the James Irvine Foundation's requirement to qualify for its Arts Innovation Fund, the funding source for the related study.[46] Such opportunistic responses require significant redirection of resources that may lead to short-term benefits but ultimately distract from long-term strategic action toward a sustainable infrastructure serving a consistent and cohesive mission.

In *The Cultural Museum 2.0*, JANM takes particular note of feedback that suggests that the institution is perceived by some as "uppity" and "elitist" and "removed from the Japanese American community," suggesting that "[p]revious strategies promoted the Museum as 'world-class,' leading to the misconception that the Museum had left behind its grassroots and community-based origins."[47] By concentrating on better understanding its community and addressing its audience's evolution and changing perceptions, JANM hopes to re-establish that initial connection and investment in the institution through identification. At the same time, the exemplary collection that JANM stewards is the result of promoting a commitment to the standards and practices of a "world-class" collecting institution.[48] Entrance into this compact with the community comes with an accompanying ethical obligation to either maintain professional standards in perpetuity or to take timely action to ensure the well-being

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[45] In "'It is noh mistri, wi mekin histri'," Flinn and Stevens also speak to the risks for community institutions as constructions of identity move in or out of political favor: "As soon as government policy shifts, for example, from a broadly multiculturalist to a more assertively assimilationist approach to the management of cultural difference, then independent community archives may find that their own discourse, which previously aligned them with government policy, can now be turned against them . . ." (p. 20). While this may be of more immediate concern for institutions that rely heavily on centralized government funding, it does highlight the exposure of community archives to outside perceptions of their mission. For Flinn and Stevens, the strategic response for institutions may be to "articulate narratives with an outward-looking, transformatory counter-hegemonic interplay between multiple identities including class, race, gender and sexuality [that] may be better placed ideologically to weather the changes in policy and funding . . ." (p. 22), a further broadening and complicating of identity that nonetheless still does not engage directly with the advantages of sustainable institutional structure and management.

[46] Japanese American National Museum, *The Cultural Museum 2.0*, 5.

[47] Japanese American National Museum, *The Cultural Museum 2.0*, 24.

[48] From Japanese American National Museum, "Donating Your Artifacts to the National Museum," http://www.janm.org/collections/artifact-donation/, accessed 27 July 2011: "The National Museum is committed to preserving all items in its collection to the highest professional standards, as outlined by the American Association of Museums. Every item that enters the collection is fully cataloged and rehoused in archival quality materials. The collection is maintained in secure storage rooms with constantly monitored humidity and temperature levels. The National Museum is able to practice this level of collections stewardship through the continuing generosity of our supporters, who recognize the important role we play in holding history in trust for future generations."

of the collection through other means. In this way, maintaining and fostering community relationships and acknowledging and engaging critically with institutional practice and function are by no means exclusive pursuits; in fact, with so much at stake, an emphasis on the latter only further binds it to an active engagement with the former. In taking on the role of steward for a community history not adequately collected, preserved, and made accessible elsewhere, a collecting institution is accepting responsibility for materials of permanence that can transcend the inevitable fluctuations, disappearances, and reconstitutions of community over time. If JANM continues to hold the collection primarily as a symbol of a community connection but no longer dedicates resources to the attendant responsibilities of its maintenance and accessibility, it is purposefully aggregating the materials of history and then effectively hiding them, an outcome that could not seem more at odds with the original intentions of both the institution and its founding community.

Conclusion

How JANM will resolve its challenges is an open question. JANM's twenty-five-year history could provide telling and elucidating examples of ways to negotiate in the long term the complex intersections of community, identity, funding, professional practice, and the ethics of public goods. By exclusively focusing on identity, however, JANM's segregates itself from a broader range of comparable institutions that might provide insight to more viable strategies for supporting professional practice[49] while also limiting JANM's opportunity to share its insight on the impact of fluctuations in audience and community to a more wide-ranging universe of institutions experiencing similar challenges.[50] Whether JANM can overcome its self-imposed boundaries to serve as a truly functional model

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[49] The peer institutions identified by JANM for *The Cultural Museum 2.0* study are based on a shared focus on ethnicity or race rather than on scale of operation or funding models. They include the Arab American National Museum, the California African American Museum, the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History, the Chinese American Museum, the Judah L. Magnes Museum, the Museum of Chinese in America, the National Hispanic Cultural Center, the National Museum of American Jewish History, the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center, the Skirball Cultural Center, and the Wing Luke Asian Museum. Japanese American National Museum, *The Cultural Museum, 2.0*, 19.

[50] For example, in 2008, the American Association for State and Local History's Small Museums Committee's Executive Summary on small museums' needs assessment notes a primary shared concern with "[c]ommunicating with an increasingly transient population to make local history relevant, without the traditional family connections to local history . . .", http://www.aaslh.org/documents/SummaryofSmallMuseumNeeds_000.pdf, accessed 2 December 2011.

of a community archives and not just the shell of an aspirational one remains to be seen.[51]

In the meantime, *The Cultural Museum 2.0* offers an example of when identity discourse internally defines analytical outcome for an institution to negative effect. This consequence should prompt archivists to examine their own terminology of engagement with community archives in general and to ask if limits and conditions of the larger external conversation are hindering their efforts more than advancing them. While ties to community are undeniably important to the institution, JANM is nonetheless responsible for a foundational collection of original materials documenting the history of Japanese Americans. This history, just like the community of its origin, is not inherently separate from, independent of, or marginal to the broader history of the United States. Nor is it any more or less subjective than the history documented by any other collection in any other archives. This begs the question, then, if the conditional caveat of subjectivity is really necessary for the inclusion of community archives in the landscape of professional theory and practice. And, if a continued focus on identity and subjectivity is imperative to successful archival practice, when will it be applied with equal vigor to all archival endeavors? If community archives and projects continue to be the default example for the subjective and discursive, their marginalization is only prolonged and retrenched. Rich and relevant historical records are reduced to undifferentiated ahistorical symbols of identity and the role of discursive space trumps the successful management of physical space and materials. By insisting that the application of postmodern-influenced theory is the most pressing need of community archives rather the implementation of sound, sustainable policies and practices, archivists detract from their own professional expertise. Further, by building a body of archival literature that reinforces, through encumbered terminology, a juxtaposition of wary provincial community insiders and nervous distanced archivist outsiders, we only deepen the chasm between professional discourse and actual developments and activities in the field, ignoring institutional examples that defy presumed parameters and alienating the many of us who exist outside of this binary as both archivists and engaged community members.

Rather than rehabilitating the terms, perhaps it is time to redirect the discussion on community archives. To do so is not to deny the influences of ongoing bias and inequalities; it is to open up the conversation from circling the cul-de-sac of who we are to looking more closely at what we are actually doing.

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[51] In September 2011, Gordon Yamate, chair of the JANM board, announced a national search for a new executive director for the institution. In addition to continuing to address changes in audience, Yamate identified raising money to pay off JANM's existing bond debt and investigating a "possible architectural project to unify the museum's campus" as the priorities for the position. See *Los Angeles Times, Culture Monster* blog, "Japanese American National Museum Searching for New Director," http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/culturemonster/2011/09/japanese-american-museum-little-tokyo-.html, accessed 21 November 2011.

Concluding their introduction to *Community Archives,* Bastian and Alexander raise a point well worth embracing: "As major and minor narratives conflate and become interdependent, these essays illustrate above all that 'marginal' is no longer a concept that makes sense in our world."[52] To look without preconception of what we are looking for reveals that many of the challenges ascribed to community archives—that communities are dynamic, that individuals have multiple and shifting allegiances and interests, that we look to many sources to craft our memories and our places in history, that networked technology has changed the way we create and seek information and make social connections—are in fact the challenges that all archives face. Community archives are often rhetorically positioned as contesting the tenets of the archival profession, but it is a misguided presumption that the relationship between the two is inherently fraught or estranged. As we continue to critically engage with the role of archivists in shaping the shared historical record, let us also keep some faith in our abilities as professionals and community members ourselves to be thoughtful, aware, and pragmatic and not lose sight of our commitment to preservation and access as fundamental services to all.

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[52]   Bastian and Alexander, "Introduction: Communities and Archives," xxiv.